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ABSTRACT

This article describes efforts at Norfolk State University, Virginia, to train substitute teachers, teacher aides, and other paraprofessionals to become certified teachers. The program incorporates four recruitment principles: concern for various aspects of the issue and readiness to tackle them; commitment to the program; collaboration among all involved; and creativity in developing the program. Its goals are to: increase the quantity of teachers, specifically minorities and males; increase the quality of instruction for urban children; and enhance the university's teacher preparation and inservice teacher development programs. The paper describes selection and recruitment procedures; eligibility criteria; and curriculum development. Ongoing workshops and seminars are described. They focus on: respectful attitudes and beliefs that all children can learn; knowing students by becoming familiar with their homes, cultures, and communities; providing stimulating, challenging, and meaningful instruction; identifying local community and agency support to meet students' needs; and managing the classroom. Academic and nonacademic support services are provided to participants as needed. Program evaluation indicates that it has strong support services; useful seminars; collaborative college-school relationships; institutional support; staff commitment; and a good reputation. Results suggest that preparing paraprofessionals as teachers for urban classrooms is one way to increase teacher diversity. (Contains 22 references.) (SM)

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PREPARING PARAPROFESSIONALS AS TEACHERS FOR THE URBAN CLASSROOM

A University/School Collaborative Model

The Context

Since the 1980's there have been consistent reports indicating a significant disparity between the number of minority teachers and the number of minority students enrolled in the public schools (Synder and Hoffman, 1994; Witty, 1982). The number of persons receiving education degrees dropped throughout the 1970's and 1980's and decreases in the number of prospective minority teachers were even more dramatic (Synder and Hoffman, 1994). Future projections (of minority student enrollment and minority teachers) suggest the disparity will worsen before it improves.

Efforts to reverse this trend have varied from encouraging middle and high school students to pursue teaching as a career to recruiting military retirees and other adults into the profession as a second career (Recruiting New Teachers, Inc., 1996). Although these efforts are slowly increasing the number of minorities completing education degrees, according to data collected by the AACTE (1994), the numbers are still not keeping pace with the demographic changes in K-12 enrollment. More and sustained efforts are still needed to recruit and retain minorities in education.

According to Recruiting Minority Teachers: A Practical Guide, four principles should guide recruitment programs (AACTE, 1989):

- **concern** for the various aspects of the issue and a readiness to tackle them

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- **commitment** by the highest leadership to the recruitment program or project
- **collaboration** among all those concerned about the problem, sharing information and resources and responsibilities and
- **creativity** in developing a program, being ready to combine strategies, piece elements of different programs or even try something different.

This article discusses one such effort that incorporated these principles. Since 1992, Norfolk State University has collaborated with Old Dominion University and Norfolk Public Schools to train substitute teachers, teacher aides and other paraprofessionals to become certified teachers (Phase I-1992 to1997). The project was expanded to include Portsmouth Public Schools in 1998 (Phase II-1998 to 2000). Building upon a strong history of collaboration with the participating school systems, this project funded by the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund and coordinated by the Southern Education Foundation, Incorporated was initiated to respond to predicted teacher shortages overall and in high need areas, and the discrepancy between the diversity of the public school student population and the diversity of public school teachers. In its eighth year of operation, the project's goals are to (1) increase the quantity of teachers, specifically minorities and males, employed by the school systems, (2) increase the quality of instruction for urban children, and (3) enhance the teacher preparation and in-service teacher development programs at the university.

Building Collaboration

Involving key persons and seeking input from major constituencies during the three month planning phase of the project contributed strongly to the collaboration that was developed

during project implementation. Roles were clearly defined and benefits to be gained from participation became obvious to all involved parties: the universities, the school systems and the paraprofessionals.

Norfolk State University convened several meetings and focus groups with principals, classroom teachers, department heads within the School of Education, college professors and paraprofessionals. As tentative project goals were being developed and shared, input and support was solicited and received from all of these groups. In return, crucial information was received about the needs of teacher aides as students and about school system policies. This information provided the basis for determining eligibility criteria, program and curriculum needs, student support systems and follow-up procedures following graduation and employment.

To maintain communication and support of the project during its implementation several committees were established with the following representatives: the personnel directors of Norfolk and Portsmouth Public Schools, the deans of the School of Education at both universities, the chairpersons of the respective school boards, a Virginia Department of Education representative, school principals, classroom teachers and teacher's aides comprised the Steering Committee which oversaw the project at both universities. This group met quarterly to receive project updates and provide input on policy and program areas. A Coordinating Committee was established at Norfolk State University consisting of department heads of the teacher education programs in which the participants were enrolled, the director of student teaching, the NTE coordinator and a public school teacher. This committee assisted in the scheduling and instructional delivery of classes. The Selection Committee composed of public school administrators and personnel officers, principals, college professors, classroom teachers

and community representatives interviewed all candidates for admission to the program at Norfolk State University. Meetings, formal and informal, and telephone and written communication with all of these committees continued throughout the project's duration.

During Phase I, the director of personnel for the Norfolk Public Schools became the liaison between the public schools and the universities. His office provided data regarding the percentage of minority teachers, minority student enrollment, minority male teachers, retirement trends, attrition rates, future projections of need and eligible participants/employees to be recruited. During Phase II, Portsmouth Public Schools also identified a liaison from its Office of Curriculum and Instruction who provided similar information. With this information universities were able to determine which programs leading to teacher certification should be available to participants at each institution and initiate discussions to determine other areas for collaboration (i.e. joint steering committee, shared workshop offerings, etc.) This clarified the roles of both universities while allowing each university to develop its own proposal for implementation. Each university had the flexibility and autonomy to develop its own creative program without duplication and conflict.

Collaboration was enhanced by each institution's realization of the benefits gained by participation in the project. The public schools would gain an increase in the number of certified teachers, especially minorities, working in their classrooms. As former paraprofessionals, these new teachers would be familiar with the students, their backgrounds and communities. The Schools of Education would receive an increase minority student enrollment and the opportunity to be creative in developing or enhancing programs for teacher certification with emphasis on the urban classroom and meeting the needs of the nontraditional student.

Commitment

The benefits to be gained and ownership of the program helped to ensure the commitment of the leadership of all institutions involved from the superintendent of schools and presidents of universities to deans of the schools of education. That commitment helped to promote the university-wide and school-wide support needed to implement the project. Public school commitment was needed because one indicator of the project's success required graduates to be reemployed as teachers. University personnel had to commit to putting in the structures and mechanisms to support participants' retention and graduation. Each institution realized its integral part to the success of the project and commitment of key personnel was effectively established during the planning phase. Due to the autonomy of each institution's program, the remaining 'C's of recruitment, concern and creativity, will be discussed from the program based at Norfolk State University.

Concern

The typical paraprofessional enrolling in the project was older (25-50 years old), a parent, female, employed (full-time and/or part-time), returning to school after an absence of nine years average, highly motivated, determined, focused, and very anxious. All were juggling work, family and community responsibilities and were being required to handle one more: school and academic pursuits. Understanding, patience, concern and encouragement were needed by all with whom they had contact.

Though highly determined, focused and motivated, high anxiety levels characterized this group. Different aspects of time became an issue: (1) being older, many felt no time could be squandered that did not lead to an achievable goal, (2) there was not enough time as they juggled family, work, community and school responsibilities yet they were determined to handle it all and (3) there was not enough time to accomplish all they wanted within the project's guidelines. Many times a sympathetic ear, a pat on the back, or listening to someone say 'you can do it' was all that was needed. Other times, helping students with time management skills, rearranging class schedules to be compatible with work and family responsibilities and, to encourage family support, providing a yearly spouses' workshop (for spouses, family members and significant others) provided the solution and reduced the anxiety.

Academic advising became a critical component. For some paraprofessionals, registration, class schedules, university rules and regulations, locating offices and buildings on a university campus required adjustment after an absence. Orientation and group admissions for each new group enrolled eased the adjustment process. Academic advising was a key responsibility for the project coordinator who held individual conferences each semester, and more if needed, to assist students in their progress through the program and provide intervention, encouragement and assistance when necessary. Each participant had two advisors: the project director or project coordinator and an advisor form his/her academic department. The project director and coordinator also maintained contact with members of the Coordinating Committee, participants' instructors and coordinator of support services to note participants' progress and to recommend interventions when needed.

Monthly meetings were held with all participants to share concerns and information and

respond to concerns as participants proceeded through the program. Since most university offices closed at 5:00 p.m., an evening office was opened from 4:00-6:30 p.m. to facilitate communication with participants who usually arrived on campus after 4:00 p.m. Also, an evening child care facility was established and available to the children of participants from 4:00 p.m. to 10:00 p.m. daily. It was important for project personnel to be accessible, demonstrate concern, intervene and provide solutions when needed.

Creativity

If creativity can be defined as 'to bring about', 'to cause to be', 'to shape', or 'to invest in a new character', then the delivery of the curriculum and the curriculum itself became areas of focus. To meet the needs of participants who were still employed full-time by the school system, the scheduling of classes and the methods of instructional delivery had to be modified. All classes had to be scheduled in the evening, weekends or, if necessary, by independent study. The regular teacher education curriculum was reviewed and several modifications were implemented:

(1) Some courses in the undergraduate curriculum were eliminated to allow participants to take other courses that would provide a stronger knowledge base for teaching in an urban environment.

(2) Substantial and documented successful experience as a teacher's aide was a possibility for a partial waiver of the student teaching/internship experience.

(3) Monthly seminars and/or workshops and an annual conference focusing on teaching the urban student and multicultural education were held to enhance and augment the regular teacher preparatory program.

(4) Five instructional modules on multicultural education and the urban student on topics ranging from curriculum development to working with parents were developed to be used independently by participants and by faculty in the regular education program

(5) To close the gap between theory and practice, principals, classroom teachers, parents, and university professors were workshop/seminar presenters and team teachers in courses whose topics focused on aspects of teaching the urban student.

The Project

Selection and Recruitment

Procedures used to identify and recruit paraprofessionals (noncertified teachers) into the Pathways program included:

(1) sending letters of information to all teacher aides, substitute teachers and other paraprofessionals employed by the Norfolk and Portsmouth Public School Systems

(2) asking principals and teachers to refer candidates to the project

(3) asking university professors who supervise student teachers in the Norfolk and Portsmouth Public Schools who have weekly contact with teachers and paraprofessionals to nominate potential applicants

(4) asking community leaders to communicate information about the project

(5) posting notices on bulletin boards in schools

(6) disseminating information about the project through the local news media (television, radio, newspaper)

Over 750 inquiries and applications were received from prospective applicants. Not only were applications received from the targeted group employed by Norfolk and Portsmouth Public Schools but from six surrounding school districts.

Eligibility Criteria

One hundred and six participants were enrolled in Phase I of the project and thirty-two were enrolled in Phase II. The following criteria were used in selecting Pathway Scholars:

(1) two years of college education, at least 60 semester hours of transferable credit toward an educational program

(2) a grade point average of 2.3 or better

(3) commitment to education for children in urban areas

(4) commitment to teaching in high need areas identified by Norfolk and Portsmouth Public Schools (Early Childhood Education, Special Education, Mathematics, Science, Foreign Language, Business Education, Technology Education, and Consumer Services)

(5) three letters of recommendation; one from a supervising classroom teacher or principal and one from a college instructor or a person who could determine the applicant's potential for success in the program.

(6 satisfactory personal interview by the Selection Committee

With all other criteria met, the academic preparation of participants entering the project ranged from the minimum 60 credit hours to post-baccalaureate credit.

Curriculum

An assessment of the relevance of the teacher education program prior to the inception of the Pathways project revealed the academic programs leading to teacher certification were more than adequate. Programs were state and nationally accredited and multicultural education and issues of diversity had been areas embraced by the faculty for some years. As an historically black institution, the university traditionally had been successful in working with urban students and adults. Also, the School of Education had earned a national reputation in preparing minority teachers and had benefited from a previous program of training teacher aides. However, changes in class scheduling, instructional delivery, support systems and program enhancements emphasizing teaching in the urban classroom were needed to meet the needs of the project participants.

All classes were scheduled in the evening and on weekends. To enhance the regular education program, monthly workshops, seminars and an annual conference for school administrators and classroom teachers were established to focus on curriculum and other areas of working with urban students. To bridge the gap between theory and practice, classroom teachers, principals, and college faculty team taught classes and copresented in workshops and seminars. Throughout the regular education program, workshops, seminars and an annual conference for participants, administrators, classroom teachers several themes based upon a consensus of teacher educators, classroom teachers and the teacher education literature were emphasized for working with urban students:

(1) **Having an appropriate attitude that demonstrated respect for all children.** Respect for all students and their culture is the foundation for effectiveness in teaching all students. It implies the acceptance of students within the framework of their own culture and the ability to accurately identify strengths and weaknesses. (Hillard, 1989; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Villegas, 1991).

(2) **Believing that all children can learn**. Teachers who demonstrate respect for children and their culture will find it easier to believe all children can learn. These students will seek strategies, materials, additional resources and culturally relevant practices for success rather than focusing on the student's difficulties and deterrents to learning. (Irvine, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Villegas, et al, 1996).

(3) **Knowing the student by becoming familiar with the student's home, culture and community environment.** This requires talking with parents, making home visits, visiting the surrounding community and observing students in and out of school settings. Information gained will help bridge the gap between home and school and enable teachers to make appropriate instructional and management decisions. (Irvine, 1992; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lemlech, 1977; Villegas, 1991).

(4) **Providing stimulating, challenging and meaningful instruction.** Students, particularly in urban settings, need a curriculum that is engaging, stimulating, challenging and relevant. Appropriate research-based methodologies effective with minority students should be employed, as appropriate, for success (i.e. collaborative and cooperative learning, a multicultural perspective, etc.) (Davidman,

1994; Ladson-Billings, 1994; Lemlech, 1977). A watered-down curriculum, emphasizing busy work and purposeless instruction becomes self-defeating. Students become bored, tune-out or drop out. "Culturally relevant teaching sees excellence as a complex standard that takes student diversity and individual differences in account" (Ladson-Billings, 1994, p.98) and suggests that teachers should regularly acknowledge broad ranges of students' excellence, both academic and social. It also underscores the students' understanding that the teacher has high expectations for each of them.

(5) **Identifying local community and agency support to meet students' needs.** In instances when intervention is needed to meet students' needs beyond the classroom, teachers need to be familiar with others kinds of support for student and parent referral. This may include anything from food and clothing, employment, training, support groups to health care needs. Assisting the family's quality of life upon request and without being intrusive can only be beneficial to the student.

(6) **Managing the classroom.** Managing and/or monitoring classrooms is important in urban settings. Even though doing this effectively is a concern for all teachers, it is a priority in diverse settings. Without understanding the behavior of culturally diverse students, teachers may actually provoke and sometimes escalate the misbehavior they are trying to reduce, manage or control. Effective strategies that emphasize positive discipline, cooperation, instruction and helping students make responsible choices should be in the

repertoire of all teachers. (Burden, 1995; Jones, 1982; Keating, et al, 1990;).

Participants were actively encouraged to share their experiences in seminars and through their required journal writing based upon an average of 12 years of working in urban classrooms as paraprofessionals. Their knowledge base and experiences provided the foundation for discussions, expansions and reflection.

In addition, a reading list and the following five instructional modules were developed focusing on multicultural education and the urban student that could be used independently by participants or faculty members in the regular education program. They are:

(1) **Characteristics of the Urban Child-A Multicultural Perspective**

(2) **Instructional Programs and Practices Which Enhance the Learning of Diverse Students**

(3) **Developing A Culturally Diverse Curriculum**

(4) **Identifying and Selecting Materials for a Culturally Diverse Curriculum**

(5) **Relating to Parents-A Multicultural Perspective**

Support Services

Academic and nonacademic support services were provided to participants as needed. Academic support services included:

(1) academic reinforcement in mathematics, reading, writing through several campus academic learning centers

(2) Praxis preparation via a course, individualized instruction, and Learning

Plus, a software package

(3) tutoring

(4) 80% tuition support

(5) book stipends

Nonacademic support services included:

(1) an annual spouses' workshop

(2) an evening child care facility

(3) individual counseling/mentoring

(4) availability of emergency funds/loans

(5) monthly meetings

Preliminary Results/Conclusion

Since 1992, one hundred thirty-eight participants have enrolled in the program. One hundred and four participants have completed the program, twelve have withdrawn, with the remaining scheduled to complete their program by December 2000. As of January 2000, seventy-eight participants have been employed as teachers. Those students who completed their programs in January and May 2000 are anticipating employment in the fall of 2000. Of those who withdrew, critical family and financial responsibilities precluded them from completing the program.

Formative evaluations completed internally and externally by the Educational Testing Service and the Urban Institute indicate the following strengths of the project at Norfolk State University:

(1) strong support services

(2) seminars/workshops on urban education themes

(3) a good collaborative relationship between the two universities and the public school systems

(4) support of theprogram goals by the institution

(5) the dedication commitment and accessibility of the project director, the project coordinator, and other faculty and staff

(6) the extent to which the participants are held in high esteem by school district personnel andthe university faculty

Areas that were identified early in the project that were improved included:

(1) participants' perception that some teacher education courses were too theoretical

(2) participants' need for salary or additional compensation during the student teaching experience

Preliminary conclusions seem to support that preparing paraprofessionals, particularly minorities, as teachers for the urban classroom is one way to increase the number of minority teachers. At the onset of this project, minority teachers comprised thirty-eight percent of the teachers employed by Norfolk Public Schools. The percentage dropped to 36% during the first two years of project implementation. As participants completed their programs, the minority teacher percentage rose to 39%. Norfolk Public Schools has attributed their ability to maintain the percentage level of minority teachers to the DeWitt Wallace-Reader's Digest Pathways to

Teaching Project. Performance evaluations by clinical supervisors during the student teaching experience seem to indicate that the project participants perform better than the traditional student teacher. In addition, after three years of teaching, the majority of Pathways participants are still being rated 'highly effective' by their supervisors. Further, those that are in their third year of teaching are still planning to remain in the field of education teaching in the urban classroom.

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